

Brief essays for a major disaster

(...or some notes on how Guillermo Mora executes a Process Painting on the Fall)

Painting is of the mind

Pablo Picasso

1.-

Contemporary Painting, that current “artistic language” that has become timeless, recurrent, somewhat neurotic and capricious, still practiced by man as a “diversion for his senses”. Now... immersed as we are in the Era of Technology, that which we now know as “Painting,” the language closest to the human Tradition of making signs, from the perspective of our analysis—a following and a study of its latest whereabouts—we believe it a participant of a certain duality that moves it towards two fundamental programmatic implementations: 1.- “Theatrical Painting” and 2.- “Laboratory Painting”.

The first, “Theatrical Painting,” is a mechanism for symbolic fabrications that needs a stage on which to move, a territory to travel on and anchor its narrative, that is: it needs a space to unfold its script, its outline, its colorful spittle, in other words: its loquacity, its flamboyance. It is pressed to have a place from which it can not only “speak”, or pose an “argument as speechmatic”, but also grow as the thingness of a language, as an object, as the planimetric drawing of a perspective flattened towards its own depth made into language. It must be understood that this painting not only talks descriptively about space, but that which is made from space. Its sovereignty, its tightest grip, resides in its ability to control, to contract and expand.

It may seem that this typology of painting refers only to the spectacle of the “large format”, and that it is restricted only to its most “representational” character; as it is a common trope to compare “theatricality” and “representation” or “mise-en-scène”. This is not so: painting that unfolds primarily from space, from projections, or from the overflow of its own pictorial support, may also be held within it¹.

On the contrary, “Laboratory Painting” is intimate, with a methodology that is close to contention, not at all extroverted, rather introverted in fact. It denies the great big vernacular spectacle and it withdraws, it retires to its condominiums where, in the midst of privacy, builds an entelechy that is for the most part endogamous and speaks of the difficulties of developing its own pictorial language.

¹ That which we nowadays know as “Collage-Painting”, the Neo-Pop kind that recycles the iconographies surrounding its creators to mix them up in a whirlpool of references, that which is even often born of computer projections copied by their makers, would make the “Perfect Theatrical Painting”. I am thinking of such names as David Salle, Ray Smith, Neo Rauch, Michel Majerus, Franz Ackermann, Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger, or -on the Latin-American side- Ciro Quintana, Óscar Seco, Jorge Galindo, to name a few; but also figures such as the very own Barbara Krüger and her gigantographies, or Julie Mehretu’s stage-like installations.

In this sense, the second “pictorial typology” is closer to the meticulous state provided by the ascetic space of the scientific lab, be it the physics-chemistry lab, or the one for natural science, biology, botany or medicine and its pharmacopeial derivatives. This is a lab that, despite a strict adherence to the most empirical practice as an indicator of the path to follow, is, rather than a physical space, a mental state, a place of “findings” that manifest themselves in-process before the eyes of their creator.

In this case, for example, this painting has regularly substituted the verticality of the easel with the horizontality (at times slanted) of the “drafting table”. The redeeming effort within this painting does not come from the speed of the mark, but from its adversary, the result of patience².

Painting is stronger than I am. It always gets me to do what it wants.

Pablo Picasso

2.-

Within the scene of contemporary Latin-American painting, there are numerous examples of both “types of Painting”. Here we will focus on the second group.

From this *operating logic*, the path taken by artists such as the Venezuelan Arturo Herrera, who studied in Chicago and currently lives in New York, is of a stunning intelligence: he dismembers the Neo-Pop iconographic discourse of cartoons, Comic Books or Illustrated Stories for children, to take their fragments out of context and create spatial states with blocks and color patterns. The work evokes the supposed demise of Painting within a system of representational decadence, while it announces its survival to the iconographic abuse of the twentieth century. Complementary to this, the Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero, who lives in San José, also uses a “re-illustrated chromatic spatialness” that borders with the marginal graphology of the public bathroom or the most naive of our childhood drawings, and leaves us something like a game of imagined cartographies. Similarly, it provides a view of the “Act of Painting” from a certain deconstructivist iconoclasm: it regenerates a notion of Painting that can evade claustrophobic objectual concepts and unblock the squareness of the stretcher. This is a strategy akin to that used over twenty years ago by the Cuban artist Flavio Garcíandía³, who has, surprisingly enough, returned years later to traditional “painting” from the perspective of the “abstract narrative” that became so popular later on.

Certain viewpoints assume that Painting is a playful mood-liberating exercise, within which there is no room for rationality, but in which the sense of order is not ruled out.

² Here I can of course recall names such as Fred Tomaselli, Marcelo Pombo, Eduard Duvall-Carrier or, more specifically, the pictorial pranks of the Mexican artist Marcos Lamoy or the Puerto Rican Melvin Martínez.

³ Flavio (like Melvin, the aforementioned young Puerto Rican artist) has always used glitter in his painting, perhaps... many years before the famous Fiona Rae.

This order is perhaps oriented by the parsimony with which the paintings themselves dictate to him—as they did to Picasso (the great breaker of all possible molds)—the coming steps to materialize them into Works of Art.

More specifically within the realm of Spanish painting, this type of investigative approach to the pictorial act from the viewpoint of a certain amount of accumulated, residual and recycled process, has been undertaken by artists such as Mitsuo Miura (Japanese-born but established in Spain since the mid-80s), whose work has evolved from operating flatly within a “perfect colorful minimalism” into an “explosive sculptural-painting-object” or a progressively more installational slackness. Within this methodical frequency, we can rethink the work of Soledad Sevilla and Rosa Brun, who are likely our most sculptural painters, as well as the Venezuelan Clemencia Lavin, or more recent creators like Manu Muniategiandikoetxea, Toño Barreiro or Ángela de la Cruz.

I do not say everything, but paint everything.

Pablo Picasso

3.-

Entrenched, thus, within a reborn generation that faces Painting from the audacity of those who have nothing to lose and all the patience in the world to achieve highflying aesthetic results, Guillermo Mora (Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, 1980), is a creator who enjoys building his work from the litany of a late finding.

The epistemic mannerism of his work conjugates both of the aforementioned paths, as the work is apparently produced within the coldness of a lab where observation, experimentation and addition conspire to objectify speaking objects. On exhibit, however, the moment the pieces are observed, their shape becomes suddenly theatrical in space, as if the artist was taming the space where his work resides, and exhibiting both as one.

It is as if calm reigned within him. Even if it seems not so, sometimes calm reigns within him. This calm can be broken by a certain blurry force; or by the collapse of some support or material skin; or by the drooping taxidermic hide of the oil paint, the Painting's all-healing, sign-providing, protective skin. A quiet skin, after all.

This skin might be understood in the way a furrier would: like an animal hide, a metaphor of our protection, and a luxury, a squander; skin as a working material that is both container and contained, space and object, territory and map, texture and fluid.

In this way, Guillermo Mora, despite his youth, separates himself from the *Tradition of Young Spanish Painters* in tune with the more representational side—internationally

speaking—of Neo-Pop, and enters into an accumulative investigation of how to rebuild Painting from the doctrines that dominate it from the inside.

For example, he believes in the symbolic linguistic capacity of oil paint, a slow-drying material, to denote the stages of time within our rushed western lives. He shouts in murmurs for the apocalyptic destruction of the system, and from disaster he argues for a reordering of the exhibited landscape he touches. Likewise, his paintings are not rectangles: the stretcher forms part of a certain sculptural conception of the “Painting-Object”, where the container becomes content and the medium (oil paint itself) a support that threads together, blends, coagulates, the fingerprints of chaos.

In a strange—homey/tamed—way, he lets painting itself guide his consecutive steps. It is Painting that makes sense of its own organization chart while the artist explores it as if led by a mute, almost blind, symphony, oriented by the quasi Braille-like tact of its signs. From it come the letters, the re-made wood, the boxes, the wrappings, the reservoirs, the shredding, the drippings, the crowds, the buildups, the ruptures, the waste, the accumulations re-ordered as retinal classifications that surpass the emotional reasoning of color. In other words, the exercise of eternal learning of one who holds his breath and says “let’s see how deep I can reach within this strange sea in one breath” to then come afloat and say “this is how far I have gotten”. And does this daily until he gets farther, like a long-distance apnea diver⁴.

It is sad that the provincialism that surrounds our sectarian national artistic milieu can arrive at the—facile—referential platitude of a work that is “tied” to the paths carved by the three latest young Spanish artists mentioned here. Due to the years he spent studying in the US (he finished Fine Arts at *The Art Institute of Chicago*), however, Guillermo is actually a lot closer to the wing led by creators such as Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker or Jessica Stockholder. It was the latter who taught him that although it was not necessary to “paint everything”, as Picasso stated, everything was and is apt to be read and used as Painting, if it is handled as a pictorial experience with a color meaning. With the aforementioned artists, G. Mora shares an affiliation to the detailed color plane and its potential as a presence with a visual impact.

This visual impact says only: “this is what I am, look no further, just Painting, a spurt of color in your sight, nothing else”. Just like that.

This is how we arrive at his Painting, as if rehearsing a brief solipsism on the hecatomb of the subject, in order to face, from a position of decadence, abandon and solitude, a greater disaster that announces the close end of all things human. Guillermo works as if manifesting himself manually through pictorial craftwork, as if pronouncing a colorful calling of acronyms looking for words hollowed by despair and emptiness, as if filling our sight with chromatic bombardments in order to save it from the flattening screen

⁴ Typical water sport of some tropical islands based on diving without immersion equipment, using only one’s lungs.

shot of our psyche. This is Painting, once again, leaving to us the mark of our fall, giving us, perhaps, the last breath to keep us from falling.

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